

**University College Dublin
School of Education**



The Impact of Anxiety on Student Learning and the Inclusive Strategies that can be Implemented to Support Students with Anxiety in the Classroom

This dissertation is submitted to University College Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Professional Masters of Education

Niamh Hogan

Research Supervisor

Head of School
Assoc. Prof William Kinsella
Module Coordinator
Dr Deirdre McGillicuddy



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Chapter 1: Introduction

School is a central part of young people's lives and thus can serve as a point of support for students struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety. This thesis aims to examine the impact of anxiety on students' learning and academic performance, aid teachers in identifying key signs that a student may be experiencing anxiety, and to explore the strategies and accommodations that can be implemented to support students with anxiety in their learning. I have struggled with mental health disorders, including anxiety disorders throughout my life. I had a very difficult time in secondary school with little to no support. As a result, my difficulties increased over time and significantly impacted my education at third-level. I remember how daunting school was for me, and the dread that I felt walking into classes. I would count down the minutes until the bell rang for class to end. My heart would race throughout the class at the thought of being called upon to speak out loud. I also found it extremely difficult to concentrate on what was happening in class, and my mind was preoccupied with racing thoughts. My educational experience was not inclusive of my well-being, or specific learning needs, and thus I am passionate to ensure that my classes are a safe and comforting environment, supportive of all students in their learning. In order to do so, I think that it is vital to be able to recognise when students are experiencing such difficulties to then implement strategies and accommodations to suit their particular needs.

Mental health is described as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” by the World Health Organisation (2017). Mental health problems impact a young person's cognitive abilities, emotional and social development, educational attainment, and their potential to live as healthy and productively as possible (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2013). It is estimated that one in four young people experience some form of psychological difficulty. Anxiety is the most common of these psychological difficulties (Kessler et al., 2005), and it has been found that one in twelve adolescents meet lifetime criteria for anxiety disorders (Dooley et al., 2019). Anxiety disorders are a group of mental health disorders characterised by intense feelings of anxiety and fear. Anxiety disorders have profound impacts on students' educational experiences and their quality of learning. Students

with anxiety may find it difficult to pay attention, as their worries are their predominant thoughts. Students may also feel nervous and anxious within the classroom, hoping they will not have to speak out loud (Nail et al., 2015). Their anxiety and lack of support in the classroom creates an uncomfortable environment, which prevents them from processing information properly, thus hindering their learning and academic progress (DES, 2020). Students with anxiety require a safe learning environment, where their individual learning and emotional needs are met (Department for Education, 2018). It is important that teachers recognise and value the needs of such students (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2014). This thesis will examine how such an environment can be created by addressing the following questions:

1. What is the impact of anxiety on students' academic performance and progression?
2. What factors may indicate to teachers that a student has anxiety and may require additional learning supports?
3. What strategies can be implemented into classroom environments and schools to aid in the inclusion and support of students with anxiety with regards to their learning?

Mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety disorders affect more than one in six people across European Union states every year. It is estimated that the annual financial cost associated with the impact of mental health problems is over €600 billion (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). At any one time, there is an average of over 2200 children and teenagers waiting for an initial assessment by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Barnardos, 2018). The financial cost of mental health services, the prolonged wait times for treatment and the fact that school is the place where children and adolescents spend a significant amount of their time (OECD, 2017), means that school is the ideal setting for the intervention of mental health difficulties (European Commission, 2016). There is an intrinsic relationship between education and mental health and thus schools are in a unique position to promote mental health and emotional well-being, and identify young people who are experiencing difficulties such as anxiety (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2017 and Department for Education, 2018). It is stated that the classroom learning and teaching environment, the approaches used, and the relationships and interactions that young people encounter throughout their time in education, all impact the mental health of young people (DES, 2013). The Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines, set out by the NCCA (2017) states that teachers

“who seek to promote high academic standards and those who seek to promote mental, emotional and social health realise that they are on the same side”, and that social and affective education can support academic learning, not simply take time away from it. Under The Teaching Council’s (2016) policy outlining the code of professional behaviour for teachers, it is stated that teachers have a duty of care and responsibility to create a learning environment where students feel safe and secure. The National Suicide Research Foundation have recommended that all secondary schools in Ireland implement the promotion of supports for mental health issues including anxiety (McMahon et al., 2017). The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, as set out by the Department of Education and Skills (2019), recognises that support and training for teachers are required in order to help them understand their role in supporting young people with mental health issues such as anxiety in their classrooms.

An external literature review will be conducted in Chapter 2 by examining research based around mental health issues, particularly anxiety, that adolescents in full-time education are experiencing. This examination will primarily focus on publications containing data relating to students with anxiety and their academic performance and educational experience in comparison to their student counterparts with no significant mental health issues. Policy documents relating to well-being, mental health strategies and procedures currently in place in schools in Ireland will also be examined. Chapter 3 will demonstrate a reflection of teacher practice and experience to date, in relation to the findings and evidence presented in the literature review. It was beyond the scope of this assignment to carry out focus groups or surveys with students and teachers, thus Chapter 4 will give conclusions of the investigation in relation to the relevant literature and policy documents examined. Chapter 4 will also indicate the possible implications on teaching practice and educational policy going forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to research carried out by UCD School of Psychology and Jigsaw, the number of Irish teenagers facing problems relating to anxiety has doubled in the last few years, from 11% in 2012 to 22% in 2019 (Dooley et al., 2019). In addition to students facing challenges in school as a result of mental health conditions, many Irish students experience school-work related anxiety. While a certain amount of anxiety is to be expected in an examination environment, and is even optimal for peak performance, high levels of anxiety can have detrimental effects on students' performance (Bonaccio and Reeve, 2010). Anxiety and stress have an impact on the cognitive skills required to prepare for and sit an examination (DES, 2020). Young people also report that school is a factor that contributes to feelings of stress or anxiety, which is not surprising due to the large proportion of time that young people spend in school or engaging in education-related activities (Låftman et al., 2013). Therefore schools play an important role in supporting and fostering the wellbeing and mental health of their students, as well as identifying young people experiencing emotional distress. Policy documents such as Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019) and Guidelines for Wellbeing in Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2017) state that classroom environments, approaches and interactions that young people experience, all have an impact on the mental health of young people.

Teachers can play a pivotal role in promoting students wellbeing by helping students reduce and cope with this stress and anxiety in the classroom (OECD, 2017, and Department for Education, 2018). The Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines state that the promotion of well-being is central in enabling children and young people to achieve their full potential and that schools play a key role in developing and enhancing young people's well-being (NCCA, 2017). There is overwhelming evidence that students learn more effectively, including their academic subjects, if they are happy in their work, believe in themselves, and feel school is supporting them (NCCA, 2017 and Barry et al., 2017). The implementation of support structures in schools and classrooms can improve the overall quality of education that a young person receives (DES, 2019). While Irish policies place emphasis on the importance of wellbeing in the education system, UK policy, 'Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools', set out by the Department for Education (2018) states the responsibilities of schools in the support and identification of mental health issues. Teachers are in a position where they hold

a responsibility and a duty of care to their students (Teaching Council, 2016). Teachers can show support to students with anxiety by the implementation of classroom accommodations and strategies. These strategies are inclusive and may be beneficial to all students in the class (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012 and Moran, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that many strategies can be implemented within classrooms and school environments to increase the probability of successful outcomes, in relation to helping students reduce the impact of anxiety interfering with their academic success (DES, 2013). The impact of anxiety, identifying anxiety in the classroom, and the strategies that can be implemented by teachers and schools, will be further developed throughout this review. The content of this review is split into three sections in accordance with the research questions to be investigated;

2.1 The impact on student learning and academic performance

What is the impact of anxiety on students' academic performance and progression?

2.2 Identifying anxiety in the classroom

What factors may indicate to teachers that a student has anxiety and may require additional learning supports?

2.3. Implementation of strategies to support students with anxiety.

What strategies can be implemented into classroom environments and schools to aid in the inclusion and support of students with anxiety with regards to their learning?

2.1 The impact on student learning and academic performance.

Research carried out by the UCD School of Psychology and Jigsaw found that many Irish students experience school-work or assessment related anxiety, known as 'test anxiety' (Dooley et al., 2019). Test anxiety is a response to students identifying that there is a conflict between what they believe they can achieve, and the perceived performance expectations influenced by others, including teachers (Bonaccio and Reeve, 2010). Anxiety and stress have an impact on the cognitive skills required to prepare for and sit an examination. These cognitive skills regulate working memory, process the speed and ability needed to switch between tasks, influence planning and organisational ability, and are required in order to have the ability to sustain attention. (DES, 2020). When anxiety is examined in the educational context, test anxiety is

dominant, however, this provides only a glimpse of the effects of anxiety regarding school functioning and academic performance (Mychailyszyn et al., 2010).

Adolescent anxiety has a negative impact on a broad range of variables including academic performance, lack of engagement in the classroom, lack of self-confidence, fear of failure and poor relationships with teachers and peers (Coughlan and O'Brien, 2011). Students' learning is directly affected as anxiety can impact the working memory, making it difficult for students to retain new information or recall previously learned material (Nail et al, 2015). In addition to a hindered academic performance in assessments, students with anxiety have difficulty giving oral reports and reading aloud in class. This is often attributed to underlying concerns regarding negative evaluation and performance (Nail et al, 2015). Difficulty with oral tasks not only impacts overall academic performance in secondary level education, but also has the potential to contribute to long-term negative academic and vocational outcomes (Duchesne et al., 2007). Anxiety disorders can also result in school refusal which often leads to further academic difficulties and an increased risk of underachieving in school. (Kessler, 1994). School refusal was apparent for one out of five adolescents with anxiety disorders (Waite and Creswell, 2014). A study focusing on the transition from secondary level education to tertiary education found that adolescents with anxiety disorders were less likely to enter university education in comparison to their non-anxious cohorts (Woodward and Fergusson, 2001). School refusal and avoidance can have long-term consequences, a lack of education can result in underemployment or unemployment and thus a reduced quality of life (Duchesne et al., 2007). The overall functioning of students and their academic performance are reciprocal. Anxiety reduces overall functioning, which negatively impacts academic performance. At the same time, negative academic performance and progression increases levels of anxiety and reduces overall functioning (Nail et al., 2015).

2.2 Identifying anxiety in the classroom

Anxiety can be categorised as an internalising disorder, or nonvisible disability (NCSE, 2014), which tends to be much less conspicuous in the classroom environment in contrast to students with disruptive or externalising disorders such as

ADHD or ADD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or attention deficit disorder). The negative impact that anxiety has on concentration can sometimes result in anxiety being misdiagnosed as ADHD or ADD (Naparstek, 2009), and thus the additional needs of students with anxiety may go unnoticed (Van Ameringen et al., 2003). Although it is not the responsibility of teachers to diagnose students with anxiety in their classrooms, it is critical for teachers to be able to identify such students in order to support and assist them in their learning (Moran, 2015). According to Coughlan and O'Brien (2011), and Mental Health Ireland (2018), key indicators of anxiety amongst young people include:

- Cognitive symptoms such as a lack of focus or concentration, an inability to make decisions and persistent worrying
- Physiological symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, dizziness, muscle tension, insomnia, fatigue and trembling.
- Behavioural symptoms such as avoidance of work, school refusal, classroom disruptions, an inability to relax, and social isolation

When teachers identify such warning signs and indicators, they can develop a system of support within their classroom, and implement strategies to enhance student's quality and experience of education (Johnson et al., 2011). Teachers may also need to contact or liaise with other school staff or family members of the student to help connect the student to appropriate health professionals in some circumstances when concerns emerge regarding a young person's welfare or well-being (DES, 2013). The National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) have set out a list of factors that teachers can consider in such circumstances. This list includes; identifying if the behaviour is unusual for the student, is there a pattern to their behaviour, is the student in danger, who may need to be consulted (NEPS, 2019).

2.3 Implementation of strategies to support students with anxiety.

Creating an optimal learning environment, inclusive of students with anxiety, promotes a positive learning experience for those students, helping to reduce negative

impacts of anxiety on academic performance (Clapper, 2010). According to the NEPS (2019) and the Continuum of Support policy document, post-primary teachers can create and develop positive educational environments which foster positive mental health by differentiating teaching and learning activities, using positive and constructive feedback, helping students feel a sense of belonging in school, identifying and reinforcing student's learning styles and competencies, and helping to develop a student's coping strategies. Teachers can implement numerous inclusive strategies and accommodations in the classroom that will assist and support students with anxiety, as well as being beneficial for all students (Moran, 2015). This dissertation will examine various strategies and accommodations that fall under the following three categories; classroom structure, classroom practices, and assessment.

2.3.1 *Classroom Structure*

The implementation of a specific seating plan where students with anxiety are given preferential placement such as near an exit can reduce symptoms of anxiety in the classroom (Moran, 2015). Assigning students specific places can also allow for anxious students to be seated away from rambunctious classmates to aid with concentration (Mercer et al., 2011). Students with anxiety may also feel the need to leave the classroom environment temporarily if symptoms become overwhelming, allowing students to use a classroom 'pass' where they can leave class when they are experiencing symptoms without drawing attention to themselves is important for a student's self-esteem. The pass allows them to access a pre-decided safe place or staff member for a few minutes to work through their symptoms before returning to class (White et al., 2009).

2.3.2 *Classroom Practices*

Having a consistent daily routine in the classroom that is well organised with clear expectations can aid students with anxiety by reducing excessive worry (Killu et al., 2016). Teachers can also give students notice of any changes to the daily classroom routine, or upcoming tasks and activities to further reduce worry and help students to prepare themselves adequately for such activities (Lewis and

Doorlag, 2006). Many students with anxiety benefit from having pre-planned breaks throughout a class as it helps students to re-gain focus and prepare for upcoming tasks (Barrett and Shortt, 2003). In addition to students having clear expectations for the duration of the class, it is also beneficial for students to have clear expectations of the workload and standard of work required (Mercer et al, 2011). Teachers can also implement strategies such as providing a hard copy of notes, providing clear instructions for tasks on the board, and the use of graphic organisers to aid with issues such as poor working memory and attention deficits caused by anxiety (Lewis and Doorlag, 2006 and Mercer et al, 2011). Students with anxiety may also have difficulties reading aloud or speaking in front of a class, the implementation of group work activities allows students to contribute their answers that they may not have been willing to volunteer independently. Carefully selected groups can also assist in building students confidence and are beneficial for those with social anxiety (White et al, 2009, and Moran, 2015). It may also be beneficial to determine students preference for activities and levels of participation, including answering questions out loud during class, to find out what level of engagement they are comfortable with (Killu et al., 2016). The implementation of positive coping skills, such as soothing music in the background for tasks can also help students relax and overall improve stress levels, thus decreasing symptoms of anxiety in the classroom (White et al, 2009).

2.3.3 *Assessment*

Providing alternative assessment accommodations such as extra time and a quiet environment can reduce anxiety and increase students' performance (Derakshan and Eysenck, 2009 and Lewis and Doorlag, 2006). The implementation of additional assessment supports such as a scribe or reader also aid students with anxiety in completing their assessment (Killu and Crundwell, 2016). Teachers can also provide students with an alternative method of assessment such as assignment if a student's anxiety permits them from sitting an examination or the particular assessment significantly increases their symptoms of anxiety

(Moran, 2015). When students are completing assignments, it is beneficial to provide advance notice of an upcoming assignment, as well as having flexibility regarding the submission date if students' anxiety is causing them difficulties in completing the assignment on time (Mercer et al., 2011). The structure of the exam can also impact students' performance in assessments. Assessments that have distinct segments, and begin with easier style questions such as multiple choice can help to relax students, improve their self-confidence and reduce anxiety during the exam (Killu et al., 2016). Students with anxiety may be sensitive to failure or perceived failure, and thus it is important for teachers to reinforce positive and supportive feedback on assessments, reiterating that students should strive for progress and not necessarily perfection. Such positive feedback and praise can also improve intrinsic motivation and help to establish good relationships in the classroom. (White et al, 2009).

Upon the implementation of such strategies, it is important for teachers to communicate with other relevant staff members to provide updates on how the accommodations are working, and the progression of the students (Moran, 2015). Targeting anxiety-related academic impairments by the implementation of such strategies and accommodations can reduce other anxiety symptoms and help to promote academic performance (Killu et al., 2016).

The OECD (2019) found that students who feel supported by their teachers are more motivated in school, and perform at higher levels, and that teacher's support in the classroom influences behaviour of students, engagement in learning, and self-efficacy, resulting in lower levels of anxiety and an increase in academic performance level. Improved communication about mental health issues including anxiety in schools has improved young people's attitude towards seeking professional psychological help and support (Sharp et al, 2006). The implementation of strategies and accommodations for inclusive education of students with anxiety empowers them to take control over how they respond to anxiety inducing situations or events, and provides support in how they can cope with these problems in the future. Providing anxiety-reducing strategies in the classroom can also help to reduce

school related anxiety at a younger age and prevent it from manifesting as students' progress through the education system (Waite and Creswell, 2014). Students with anxiety, when supported in the classroom and school environment, learn more effectively, have enhanced self-esteem regarding their abilities, and achieve higher levels of academic success. The implementation of support structures in schools and classrooms can improve the overall quality of education that a young person receives (DES, 2013).

In conclusion, anxiety can significantly impact a young person's academic performance and progress (DES, 2020). Schools play an important role in identifying students showing signs of anxiety. Intervening with concerns and implementing supporting strategies in schools can increase levels of academic success and reduce school drop-out or school attendance refusals (Moran, 2015). Support by teachers can have a positive effect on a child or young persons' development (Department of Health, 2017). Teachers have a responsibility to create a learning environment where students feel safe and secure, and establish open and positive relationships where students feel that they are listened to (Teaching Council, 2016). Students learn more effectively when they are content with their work and abilities, and feel acknowledged and supported in their school environment (NCCA, 2017). One of the core values of an inclusive teacher is to support all learners (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012), including those learners suffering from anxiety in the classroom. The creation of such environment can occur through the implementation of specific strategies and accommodations in both the classroom and with assessments (Clapper, 2010). These strategies and accommodations can reduce symptoms of anxiety for students as improve their academic performance and progression (Killu et al., 2016)

Chapter 3:

Reviewing my practice through the lens of a literature review

Reflecting on my teaching experience over the past two years, I think it was naïve of me to not consider that students may be experiencing anxiety in my classroom. Through the process of research for this dissertation, as well as my experience in the classroom, I have come to realise that anxiety can appear in unconventional ways. I will review my teaching practice by reflecting on my experiences in areas set out in the literature review; the academic impacts of anxiety, identifying anxiety in the classroom, and classroom strategies that can be implemented.

3.1 The impact on student learning and academic performance

My experience in the classroom to date has allowed me to witness the direct impact that anxiety has on students' educational progress and academic performance. I have noticed several aspects such as students with anxiety having difficulty concentrating in class, often fidgeting, doodling, or staring out the window or elsewhere for prolonged periods of time. These are in line with the impacts of anxiety in the classroom as outlined by Nail et al (2015). Difficulty concentrating directly affects students ability to engage with and remember the material covered in class, and I have noticed that when students are asked to recall information from previous classes in which they had difficulty concentrating, they are unable to do so. I previously would have accredited such behaviour with a disinterest in the subject or education in general, but as I continue to develop as a teacher I need to evaluate the student in question, and assess if their difficulty with concentration and memory is a result of anxiety, or other factors. I have noticed students with anxiety underperforming in examinations, in particular, due to time management issues. Students find it difficult to overcome feelings of anxiety and panic, in order to focus their attention on completing the questions in front of them. The expectation to complete a set amount of work in a given time period can be overwhelming (Mychailyszyn et al., 2010). I have also noticed a similar reaction in class when students are asked to complete tasks in a set time frame. Some students have trouble

concentrating on the task and frequently look at the clock to check how long they have left. I found that reassuring the class that they are only expected to try their best and do as much as they can, helps students to feel more comfortable with the task. Whilst reassuring students is helpful in class, I think that additional supports need to be in place during school exams for these students. Additional time allocated for school exams helps to ease the stress and panic students may be experiencing, thus helping students to focus their attention on completing the exam (Lewis and Doorlag, 2006).

3.2 Identifying anxiety in the classroom

From my research and teaching practice, I have gained invaluable insight into many symptoms of anxiety and how it may present in the classroom. However, as everyone is unique, a student's symptoms of anxiety in the classroom may be completely different from the ones that I have encountered, and so it is necessary to be aware that the cognitive, physiological and behavioural symptoms mentioned throughout this dissertation are only a sample of the various symptoms that may be present. In order to implement strategies of inclusion and differentiation successfully in my classroom, I must first understand the needs of the students in that class (Moran, 2015). I have encountered students that have presented a fear of speaking in front of the class, and displayed feelings of uncomfortableness being asked a question to answer aloud, such factors as outlined by Duchesne et al (2007). On reflection, I was ignorant of their needs, particularly at the beginning of my teaching experience when my lessons were primarily focused on my own role as a classroom teacher trying to cover a lesson plan. I was too invested in the assessment of students' learning via questioning in class. Had I recognised that students were displaying signs of anxiety by staring at their desks or out the window trying to avoid eye contact with me, I would have refrained from asking them questions and opted for alternative methods to assess their learning such as asking students to write their answers and checking on their work, or through the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) strategies. During online classes this year, I noticed that many students who did not usually volunteer to speak in class were much more comfortable answering questions online where they could type their answer. Online learning and

ICT strategies where students type their answer to questions or choose from a given list can be adapted for use in the classroom if students have access to a device. This allows for an alternative method of assessment that helps students with anxiety feel more comfortable in the classroom environment. As I continue on my career and further development as a teacher, I need to ensure that I can assess the learning of my students in various ways throughout each class, accounting for the individual and specific needs of the students (Killu et al., 2016).

I have also encountered students who displayed symptoms of anxiety that I was unaware of, and that appeared unusual to me, such as outspoken and disruptive behaviour in class. The student did not appear to be shy or lack confidence or display any of the symptoms of anxiety that I had experienced, and so I misidentified such behaviour as a lack of interest in education. The student in question had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. I was not informed of this until the second term of the school year when information regarding the entire year group was shared with all teachers at a staff meeting. The information regarding students mental health diagnoses was not shared with class teachers before this time. In my opinion, this displays a lack of communication between school departments. Greater communication and a collaborative effort would allow for improved knowledge of student's learning needs. As anxiety can present in a myriad of ways, it is imperative that teachers are made aware of the mental health conditions that students in their class are facing, in order to facilitate the additional learning supports that these students require.

3.3 Implementation of strategies to support students with anxiety.

Throughout my teaching practice I have always been conscious of my classroom being a safe learning environment. My hope is for students to feel supported in their learning, and to limit the impact of anxiety on their educational progress and performance as much as possible. In order to improve on my ability to create such an environment, reflecting on my practice is essential. I will reflect on my practice to date the implementation of strategies throughout the following sections;

3.3.1 Classroom Structure

I have learned the value of seating plans. I did not use seating plans at first and quickly noticed that some students were always sitting alone. Once implemented, classroom behaviour and engagement significantly improved, it also helped to improve the concentration of students with anxiety (Mercer et al, 2011). In particular, I greatly noticed significant academic improvements in two students with anxiety once they were assigned specific seats; one student was moved to the front of the class near an exit, and the other was placed next to another student of a similar persona. Both student's results in class tests, as well as their class engagement, improved almost immediately.

3.3.2 Classroom practices

Lewis and Doorlag (2006) stated that a clear class plan shared with students is helpful to those with anxiety. I often began classes with a breakdown of a plan for the lesson, on reflection, I think that this helped lessons to be more efficient, with less disruption. I noticed that students were more engaged with activities when they were notified of them prior to class. I also provided students with a hard copy of notes at the end of each section, to help students who had difficulty concentrating (Mercer et al., 2011). I try to ensure that I keep a warm and personable presence as much as possible in the classroom in order to create a positive and safe learning environment. I also found that praising students for their work and encouraging engagement in class, in line with strategies outlined by White et al (2009), were key in the improvement of intrinsic motivation and the level of engagement during class. I think that greeting students at the door with a welcoming presence and a smile would also help in the creation of a positive and safe learning environment, however, due to the classroom being student-based this year this was not always possible. Pending on health and safety guidelines for schools in the future, I will aim to begin all classes by welcoming students at the door.

3.3.3 Assessment

I began starting all class tests with multiple choice questions as my knowledge of differentiation strategies improved. I originally structured tests this way to aid students with learning difficulties, but as my research for this dissertation continued, I found that it was also of benefit to students with anxiety, as it helped to boost their confidence in their ability (Killu et al., 2016). At the end of class tests I placed a reflection sheet for students to complete, I noticed that students with anxiety tended to give a negative reflection of their perceived abilities. Following this, I would ensure to give positive feedback to help increase their self-confidence. On reflection, I need to ensure that when using student reflection sheets I word the questions carefully so that students do not have the opportunity to negatively critique their test performance. I also feel that I need to implement various assessment strategies, or choice with assessment, for example allowing students to choose between giving an oral presentation or creating a poster, to help students feel more comfortable in the classroom (Mercer et al., 2011).

Comparing the literature and policy documents as mentioned throughout this dissertation, with my experience to date in a classroom and within the school environment, it is apparent that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the additional learning supports required by students with mental health difficulties, in particular, anxiety. Policy documents such as Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019) and Guidelines for Wellbeing in Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2017) discuss the implementation of wellbeing policies and curriculum in schools, and the importance of inclusivity of all students in the classroom, but lack the guidance on how teachers can be inclusive of all students learning needs regarding their psychological wellbeing. There is insufficient training, support and resources available to teachers on the matter in Ireland, with more resources and information provided to teachers in the UK, such as the *Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools* document set out by the Department for Education (2018).

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems that young people today are facing. The amount of young people encountering such problems has grown consistently over the last few years, with Irish research shows an increase in the number of teenagers facing problems relating to anxiety doubling from 11% in 2012 to 22% in 2019 (Dooley et al., 2019). It has been found that anxiety has a negative impact on the cognitive skills that regulate working memory, process the speed and ability needed to switch between tasks, influence planning and organisational ability, and ability to sustain attention, thus significantly impacting academic performance and progression (DES, 2020, and Nail et al., 2015). Adolescent anxiety also has a negative impact on a broad range of other variables affecting their educational quality such as lack of engagement in the classroom, lack of self-confidence, fear of failure and poor relationships with teachers and peers (Coughlan and O'Brien, 2011). The amount and severity of social and academic problems for adolescents resulting from anxiety highlight the need for support structures to be implemented in schools throughout Ireland. It was beyond the scope of this dissertation to carry out focus groups or surveys with students and teachers, however, such research would help to create a better understanding of the impact of anxiety in post-primary schools in Ireland. While there has been a considerable growth in awareness regarding young people's mental health in Ireland over the past decade, significantly more needs to be done to address the issues that are affecting young people.

Policy documents such as Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019) and Guidelines for Wellbeing in Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2017) support that view that school can play a vital role in promoting the social and emotional well-being of students, it is necessary to ensure that all students in post-primary education are receiving the benefits of such programmes and supports, particularly those students struggling with anxiety in the classroom and school environment (Barry et al., 2017). However, it is insufficient to simply provide such policy documents to schools and teachers without the adequate training, support and resources needed. The Department of Education and Skills should provide additional support, training and resources for teachers, such as the Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools document set out by the Department for Education (2018) in the United Kingdom. This would help teachers to understand their role in supporting young people with mental

health issues, such as anxiety, in their classrooms (DES, 2019). Continuous Professional Development courses and additional training specifically regarding the understanding of mental health issues faced by students and the strategies that can be used to support such students in their learning, should be provided to all school staff. Higher educational institutions offering initial teacher training programmes can play a key role in the development of mental health awareness within the education system in Ireland with the implementation of a mental health literacy framework in the curriculum. While inclusion and differentiation are significantly emphasised during initial teacher training such as the Professional Masters of Education programme, the embedding of a mental health literacy framework into the curriculum would equip new teachers with an increased understanding and awareness of the mental health issues that students in post-primary education are facing. Teachers need to ensure that they are in a position to implement quality strategies and supports to increase the likeliness of achieving higher levels of academic success for students (Barry et al., 2017) and cannot do so without the support of the Department of Education and Skills and higher educational authorities.

Students with anxiety, when supported in the classroom and school environment, learn more effectively, have enhanced self-esteem regarding their abilities, and achieve higher levels of academic success (Nail et al, 2015). The implementation of support structures in schools and classrooms can improve the overall quality of education that a young person receives (DES, 2013). There is substantial evidence that the effective promotion of mental health programmes in school can result in long-term benefits for young people, including improved academic performance (DES, 2013). It is evident that teachers play a pivotal role in young people's well-being (OECD, 2017). Teachers not only find themselves at the forefront of well-being and mental health promotion, but also of prevention and early recognition of mental health issues, but do not feel prepared for this role (European Commission, 2016). There is a lack of knowledge and understanding surrounding mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, that young people are facing, and the impact that such problems have on their educational experience and academic performance. If we are to place such emphasis on the inclusion of all students in their learning, we need to be knowledgeable of all challenges young people are facing. We cannot implement strategies of inclusion in the classroom without understanding the specific needs of all students. Therefore it is essential that greater emphasis is afforded to the training and support of teachers regarding mental health issues among students, and also support in terms of dealing with their own mental



health issues. Ireland should follow the example of the UK, with the addition of a consultation service and training for teachers and school staff that helps them to reduce their stress and anxiety, thus enabling them to support students in a more effective manner (European Commission, 2016).

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